Electronic Death Certificates Ease Burdens for Families

SALT LAKE CITY - Utah law requires a death certificate to be registered before remains can be disposed of or transported out of state. Until recently, obtaining a death certificate over a weekend was next to impossible. However, thanks to EDEN, Utah's Electronic Death Entry Network, online death registration is available for funeral directors, physicians and the state's Office of the Medical Examiner, easing the timeline for grieving families to obtain death certificates.

On a recent Friday morning, an elderly woman died of natural causes in a Salt Lake County nursing home. Her family wanted to transport her remains to Idaho for a Monday funeral. Darren Parker, a funeral director with Salt Lake City's McDougal Funeral Home took custody of the woman's remains and initiated the death certificate in EDEN. The certifying physician logged into EDEN that evening and entered the cause of death. Saturday morning, Ellen Freeman, the deputy registrar of vital records for Salt Lake Valley Health Department logged in and registered the death. Parker was then able to print a burial transit permit from his desktop and the woman's remains were on a plane to Idaho that afternoon.

"The Monday funeral would have been impossible without EDEN," Parker said. "It provided a real benefit to families at a difficult time."

Traditionally, death registration involves a paper death certificate that must be signed by a funeral director, physician and local health department registrar. Funeral directors are responsible by law for ensuring a death certificate is registered before a body is disposed of.

"Funeral directors have always had a difficult balancing act between serving families and meeting the letter of the law," said Jeff Duncan, director of the Office of Vital Records and Statistics. "With EDEN, technology makes it possible for them to do both."

The technology also provides benefits to the Social Security Administration (SSA), which funded EDEN's development. The application links to computers at SSA allowing the State to verify a deceased person's Social Security Number (SSN).

"The SSN is the most commonly amended field on a death certificate," said Leisa Finch, coordinator of the EDEN project. "Spouses or family members often get the number wrong, resulting in further delays as the certificate must be corrected before benefits are paid." EDEN verifies the name, date of birth, gender and number all match. If they don't, the funeral director has the opportunity to fix the number before filing the certificate. That helps families, and it also helps SSA, which expects to reap substantial savings from the timely termination of benefits to deceased persons.

EDEN has been fully operational since August 1, 2006, but its use is not mandatory. "Physicians and funeral directors can still use paper," Finch said, "but we are encouraging them all to go electronic." Among the first users was Dr. Todd Grey, the state's Chief Medical Examiner. The Office of the Medical Examiner currently files over 2,500 of the state's 13,000-plus deaths annually. According to Dr. Grey, "EDEN improves the overall efficiency of the death certification process as well as my office's ability to quickly identify cases which may need to be investigated by the OME."

EDEN was developed by programmers in the Utah Department of Health under the direction of a steering committee consisting of state and local health personnel, physicians and funeral directors.

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